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ABSTRACT

A study examined the interaction of teacher and student in a methods preparation course for undergraduate special education majors. The course was structured around several projects, two types of writing logs, and readings. Fieldnotes from an observer participant, records of a debriefing meeting, students' weekly entries on content learning logs and process response logs, instructors' responses to students' writing, and students' end-of-term written evaluations were the data that informed the instructor's analysis. Results indicated that: (1) the instructor's teaching of the course was about the construction of relationships with his students--it was the personal, the connected-to-life issues, and the emotions that guided the class; (2) in several situations, the students and the instructor experienced disagreement and conflict; (3) the instructor's reflexive moves of turning issues of concern into a learning experience made the student uncomfortable; and (4) the instructor identified several behavioral and emotional response patterns that he used to make sense of the classroom experience. The instructor concluded that a metaphor that seems to fit is teaching as shamanism--a shamanic teacher is connected to the heart of the class culture, is grounded in the ways of students, yet is also connected to other ways of knowing. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RS)

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Running Head: Teaching selves

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Professing and Postmodernity: Social Constructions of Teaching Selves

Background and Study Framing

For several years I have been using feminist theory (Shrewsbury, 1987; Weiler, 1988) to shape the learning that occurs in my college classrooms. This conscious shift has been interesting and productive, as well as perplexing. Despite Ellsworth's (1989) analysis of disempowerment, I had difficulty understanding students' silence and resistance, as I struggled with my needs to empower (King, 1992). A colleague suggested that I observe her teaching for the fall of 1991, and I did so. I respected Margaret's offer and was intrigued by her claim that she was able to offer a high choice, student initiated learning environment for college students.

Participants and Course Context

I was also intrigued with Margaret's self-selected label of "academic outsider." She had long believed in "body knowing," spiritualism in teaching, using yoga to center for classes, and the value of centering her teaching on students. I came to understand how these threads of Margaret were woven into a loose, but sturdy and reliable teaching garment, when I observed her teach during the fall semester. During the spring of 1992, Margaret, reciprocated as an observing participant in Language Arts for Elementary Teachers, a course I taught, and the one in current focus.

The course was a methods preparation for undergraduate

Special Education majors. Out of 35 students, 2 were males. Because the students were a team, they took most of their professional preparation courses as a group and knew each other well. Most of the students were between 20 and 25 years. In their journals, students conveyed interests in sorority rush, aerobics, long distance boyfriends, relationships with parents and siblings, and concerns for special kids. Cliques of students included self described "serious students," a male centered social group, a group of older, "more experienced" students, and students who formed the quiet matrix of the course.

The course was structured around several projects, two types of writing logs, and readings from Calkins' (1992) Living Between the Lines. The projects included 1.) one in a group, 2.) one completed independently, 3.) one with an elementary student, and 4.) one with a partner from class. The content, the evaluation criteria, and procedures for each project were constructed in class. The students compiled portfolios and graded their own work for the course grade.

Data and Methods

Several types of data informed my analysis of teaching. Margaret's fieldnotes (101 pages), her records of our debriefing meeting (30 pages), and students' weekly entries on content learning logs (n = 500) and process response journals (n = 500) were data that informed my analysis. I also used my written responses to students' writing (n = 1000) and students' written

evaluations at the end of the course (n = 35).

Data analysis used a Constant Comparative Method (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). I read and reacted to data as it was produced in the study. For this paper, I read each type of data as a chronological record of the course, looking for categories. Next, I examined data sets around class episodes. I defined episodes as significant or interesting events that occurred in the course. Examples of episodes included: Janet's car wreck, her subsequent absence, my response, class response to my response; Terry and Diane's differences over the partner project, the class response, a cooperative learning meltdown; Monica's challenge in class, my response to Monica, Monica's storm out of class. Each type of data (fieldnotes, journals) provided a different view into the episodes. I was particularly interested in how episodes played out in the minds of the different participants and what these multiple interpretations meant to our construction of "the class."

Social Learning is "The" Learning

The major learning for me has been the realization that my teaching in this course has been about the construction of relationships with my students. It was the personal, the connected-to-life issues, and the emotions that guided the class. In particular, it was my interpretation and assimilation of students, their emotions, and their lives that drove the course. I am sure that relationships between professors and students are

always part of any course. But, the relationship thickens in workshop driven courses, where students' successive approximations with projects and portfolios dominate assessment rituals. How I feel about a particular student permeates my evaluative decisions about that student's work as well as the interaction patterns I had with individual students. I suspect that the students have always intuitively known how I feel about them and other students. And at some level of awareness, my unequal valuing of students has been troublesome, but sufficiently vague and distant. But, now that intuition has become data, I have an opportunity to do something about it. First, I'll describe some of the conflict that we encountered and how they taught me.

Differences

In several situations, the students and I experienced disagreement and conflict. A major source of difference was in "acceptability of work." I suggested to the students, in reading excerpts from Pirsig's (1974) Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, (pp. 168-178) that we had different constructs of quality. I reacted negatively to their word games, mortar board collages, and scrap books. Margaret reacted to these quality issues from a comparative stance. She suggested that her secondary students were "more professional," and were capable of higher quality effort. Inside myself, I wanted more analytical thinking from my students, more attention in their writing to my

"real literacy" issues (Willensky, 1991), and their willingness to use a critical perspective (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991) in talk and writing.

Another area of disagreement was on the allocation of grades. In an early class, we examined the underlying assumptions in a "normal" distribution of grades. As an alternative, I suggested that criterion referenced type approaches to grades would not impose quotas of grade levels. Students thought that this made sense at the time. Yet, my insistence that students assess and grade themselves was seen by most students as oppressive. In reflection, I now think that they felt discomfort because it was a novel experience. While the students provided me with specific and focused feedback on my teaching, they were unable or unwilling to use this ability on their own learning process and product.

Another point of disagreement centers on the emotional interactions in class. Many students expressed discomfort that we talked about feelings, real lives, and conflicts. I know that my personal anger frightened students, and silenced them. Students recommended in writing that I "take care of [my] personal problems outside of class." One offered an analysis: "The professor obviously has a few personal issues that he should resolve before trying a course like this again." She is right. I have a world of personal issues. But we disagree on what can and can't become part of a course. Britzman (1992) argues that

such interactions are characteristic of classrooms where traditional authority is being deconstructed.

Feelings are a problematic field in general for me and more so in highly interactive classrooms. Yet, Willensky (1990) provides a helpful lead in the role of emotions and real lives as the context for reader and writer response in the new literacy. Further, Gilbert (1988) and Long (1987) have suggested that politically informed emotional response is necessary in our classroom reading communities. But it remains difficult for me.

Teaching Patterns

Several patterns of teaching behavior became apparent from Margaret's fieldnotes and from students' written logs. To me, it is a matter of making the issues inherent in the course the focus of the learning. This is a reflexive move to turn a current issue of concern into a learning experience by "plowing it back into the course." For students, reflexivity as a teaching/learning approach was new. They were uncomfortable, and demonstrated discomfort verbally and nonverbally. They interpreted my consistent use of reflexivity as a manipulative dodge of the issue. Students suggested it is more work to decide, yet it feels good when the decision is made. At this point, I have a negative sense about plowing emergent issues back into the class. I think it is because the students are at least partly correct. When I know the answer, it seems silly to respond with "How can you find out?" Yet, to help students to

independence, I need to monitor how frequently "I know," and they don't.

I think the act of problematizing the curriculum is itself problematic. In choosing what aspects or issues were discussed, I shaped and influenced by defining appropriateness. In our approach, we first searched how we each reacted to an issue personally. Then we engaged in a systematic search for life events that may have happened to us. Next, we speculated what such knowing might mean for current and future teaching. Finally, we brainstormed similar or related talk and writing in education that related to the knowledge we had made. I think this can work. But it didn't work for some of the students in class. On a more personal level, I wonder if my needs to see this knowing in a sequential way are simply male. I wonder if my focus on conflict is male. How can I be different about this? Heath (1987) suggests I can't.

A second teaching approach was the treatment of the class like it was a commodities exchange. We discussed the allocation of time, space, quiet, attendance, grades, assessment, and project enactments as course options. Through discussion, these options were imbued with cost/benefits attributes, as guides for students' choices. While I was instrumental in this lens, it was difficult for me to see the students' reading of Calkins and their attending class as occasions for student choice. I checked myself scheming to rig attendance. I cajoled over the reading of

Calkin's elegant prose. I also considered that class events needed to be interesting for all of us on a daily basis.

Another approach that I used was one of disruption. I purposefully planned activities, or contexts that would be slightly different from expectations that students might have. In intermittently played music before class. I read from narratives about teaching that were written by other teachers. We role played disruptive children, teachers, parents, and principals. We talked about my teaching experiences as examples. I think this was a productive way to interrupt our patterned knowing, and re-view the underlying messages of the activities. Finally, we used a "class problem, to committee, to class" structure for problem solving. Students took issues and problems outside the class, discussed the problems, and then brought back recommendations to the whole class. Several ad hoc committees formed during the semester. They dealt with project evaluation rubrics, presentation preparations, editing our book, accounting for individual contributions on group projects.

<u>My Internal Response to the Class</u>

I have been able to identify several behavioral and emotional response patterns that I used to make sense of this intense experience. I experienced profound pleasure at stories that I perceive are real. When students shared real parts of their lives, they received my encouragement, commiseration, support, and joy. I love this part of teaching. Yet, when

students' reality becomes confrontational, I react defensively and "back them down." I usually feel uneasy about this use of teaching authority and seek to reconstruct my relationship with the student. This is where Margaret views me and my teaching with a codependent and dysfunctional lens. I share the glasses. I'm not sure what I want to do here, as nurturing seems to go with this codependent stance. In reflection, it seems like I want the students to engage in the course, but only in the ways that I think are OK or nice. Facilitating seems to be a delicate balance between empower and enslave. I am still thinking.

In analyzing the data, I sense an angry reaction to Margaret's criticism of "my" students. They never quite come to the level of Margaret's secondary English students. I own my part in the construction my student's as "At-Risk" vis-a-vis Margaret's, and my anger is self-directed as well. It is related, I think, to cynicism and devaluing the ways my students know. Collages and scrapbooks are neither "good" nor "bad." They are. My decision to devalue these products requires some attention. The record of my labelling several projects "stupid girl stuff" is embarrassing for its insensitivity and sexism. Yet, the existence of sexism in the way I interpret the work of my almost exclusively female students is the place for interrogation. I am really thinking about this.

Sexism is part of the construction of sexuality. I frequently related with female students through flirtatious

behavior for those students who initiated and maintained it. In an unexamined way, this was a consensual mode of discourse. But I wonder about the message I conveyed to these females about professional discourse and self actualized professional relationships. Further, as a gay man, I did not allow myself the same interaction with the two men in the course. I kept a guarded distance from the one male who I found attractive, and formed a buddy relationship with the other. From a reflexive distance, I view the inclusion of quasi-sexual relationships with males or females in my classes as inappropriate. I think I did not monitor my interaction with females because, for me, they did not count. Conversely, I circumscribed my interaction with males. This is both reductionist (interaction = sex) and essentialist (sex = gay). I am not comfortable with either rationalization. Sears (1992) and Norris (1992) suggest that educators' homophobic response to students often detracts from effective mentoring of students. It is difficult for me to deal with these internalized responses despite their situation in literary (Warren, 1974) and historical (Foucault, 1990, p. 195) contexts. Again, I am thinking about this one.

Where I'm Going

I think I need some new metaphors for how I interact with students. I am willing to do the work, but there needs to be a path. A metaphor that seems to fit is viewing my teaching as shamanic work (Meadows, 1990). As a shaman, a teacher respects

the learner. A shamanic teacher is connected to the heart of the class culture, and is grounded in the ways of students. Yet, the shamanic teacher also is connected to other ways of knowing. The role of the shaman is to create ritual space for learning. So to teach, I become the learners, the hearts of the learners. I do this to know what to use from what I know. Knowing what to use creates the appropriate ritual, the productive learning spaces. For me personally, it seems an appealing way to monitor my conflict avoidance or suppression in teaching. Avoidance and suppression seem to come out of serving my own psychic needs in teaching space. Shamanism gives me a reason for empathic responding to my students' resistance. These are the things I learned from our class.

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